



PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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Engaging on Human Rights in the Middle East: Multilateral Frameworks and the Role of the United States

1111 19th St. NW, Washington, D.C.

12:00 – 1:30 pm, September 1, 2009

This second event in a 3-part series on human rights in the Middle East, co sponsored by the Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED) and the Heinrich Boell Foundation North America, focused on the role of multilateral frameworks in promoting reform. The three-person panel consisted of **Moataz El-Feghery**, executive director of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, **Marc Schade-Poulsen**, executive director of the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network, and **Joe Stork**, deputy director of Human Rights Watch's Middle East and North Africa division, with the discussion being moderated by POMED's Executive Director **Andrew Albertson**.

El-Feghery began the discussion by describing the ways in which **authoritarian Arab governments have used multilateral frameworks to undermine human rights standards**. The world's authoritarian regimes have formed a coalition determined to block enforcement of human rights through organizations like the United Nations. The 2004 Arab Charter on Human Rights, he argued, was particularly weak because it allowed for human rights to be limited by individual governments. Women's rights, for example, were made subject to the interpretation of *shari'ah* law, undermining international protections. The League of Arab States, in the guise of combating terrorism, has also supported statements like the Arab Convention on the Suppression of Terrorism that allow authoritarian abuses of power. Within the framework of the UN, Arab governments have worked to restrict freedom of speech to prevent "religious defamation," which these governments then use as an excuse to crack down on dissenters.

Commenting on the role of European countries in the Middle East, Schade-Poulsen argued that the Barcelona Process of integrating the Mediterranean region has become a useful tool for reform. From its beginning in 1995, human rights commitments have been part of this process, but it was not until after 2001 that the European Union put pressure on southern Mediterranean countries to reform. **The current European Union conceives of the Mediterranean countries as neighbors, and it has encouraged reform through mechanisms similar to those used for countries seeking EU membership.** Human rights reports from the EU are now critical of southern Mediterranean countries, and the EU has established sub-committees on human rights. Schade-Poulsen argued for the creation of an annual EU report on human rights in the region. He worries, however, that human rights reforms in the southern Mediterranean might have reached their limits because the EU has not prioritized the region. The EU has been progressive in some cases, but a hindrance in others, because its real priorities are security and immigration controls. European civil society has not succeeded in making human rights promotion an election issue in Europe.

Turning his attention to the United States, Stork expressed cautious optimism on the Obama administration's rhetoric while offering some criticisms of its actions. In dealing with the U.S.'s own human rights record, Obama seems too eager to look ahead without coming to terms with the past. **Obama's decision not to release additional photos of prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib based on the**

premise that the issue has been resolved may send the wrong signals to regimes like those in Morocco and Algeria who also wish to close the book on the past. Referring to a report by POMED's **Stephen McNerney** on the U.S. Federal Budget for 2010, Stork said there were some positive signs in Obama's proposals for spending in the Middle East, while also some reasons for concern. In terms of multilateral organizations, Stork believes the U.S. mission to Geneva is seriously understaffed, and he expressed a hope that the U.S. will take the UN Human Rights Council more seriously. How the U.S. uses its Security Council seat will also play a large role in how effectively the U.S. promotes human rights in the region.

In response to a question regarding the Iranian regime's position that its "religious democracy" should have different human rights standards than other regimes, El-Feghery pointed out that this argument is commonly used by regimes throughout the region, including Egypt. Stork said he thought this idea had become passé, however, and was not accepted by the people of these countries. **The more common argument for repression is now national security. In fact, he pointed out, many of the groups fighting for human rights are Islamist groups in nations like Morocco, Bahrain and Turkey.**

The panelists seemed to agree that political pressure from outside powers can produce reform in the Middle East. Schade-Poulsen pointed out that the European countries with large interests in the southern Mediterranean — countries like France and Spain — are the ones blocking the EU from pushing for human rights in the region. Likewise, El-Feghery worried that the Obama administration's insistence on Arab "ownership" of their own reform process might signal diminishing pressure from the United States. Answering a question about Obama's re-engagement with some authoritarian regimes in the region, Stork said that engagement should be the default position, but that human rights should be a part of the conversation.